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Western Myanmar unrest: Partisan portrayals risk extremist implications

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Synopsis

The violence in Myanmar's western Rakhine State appears to have died down. However, partisan portrayals of the violence risks jeopardising the security of locals and Myanmar's reform process with extremist outcomes.

Commentary

The violence which flared up in Western Myanmar appears to have died down. However, the Rohingyas' allegations that they bore the brunt of the government's security operations have led to a growing call from Muslim countries and organisations for intervention in Myanmar. The country's fragile transition to democracy has further complicated the picture, as public opinion and a freer press come into play in an extremely sensitive issue. With different portrayals galvanizing various involved and uninvolved communities, there is a risk of the situation taking on extremist dimensions.

Different Portrayals

The Arakanese and Rohingyas have accused each other of premeditated and organised violence. During the unrests, the violent behaviour of one to the other was meticulously reported, with a de facto competition to upload grisly photos of victims online. Eye witness accounts, sourced and used selectively by both sides, differed wildly. Such accounts, though extremely difficult to verify, were readily utilised and embellished. The Arakanese received sympathy from the Burmese press, while the Rohingya appeared to have the upper hand abroad in the 'media war' aspect of the unrests.

The portrayal of the conflict has varied greatly and is seen as reflecting the political (and religious) stance of the reporting agencies. Burmese non-state media had generally framed the situation mainly as an 'immigrant vs. host' situation instigated by the Rohingya. Western media had been trotting out the line of sectarian conflict where the 'Buddhist Arakanese' were pitted against the 'Muslim Rohingya'. Arakanese groups, based mainly inside Myanmar, have portrayed it as a Rohingya instigated conflict. Pictures and videos of Arakanese and ostensibly non-Rohingya Muslim refugees and victims recounting Rohingya perpetrated violence, reports of arms cache finds in Rohingya villages and of armed men arriving in boats from Bangladesh, have circulated widely among Burmese circles.

A plethora of overseas Rohingya organisations increasingly have framed the situation as a government

orchestrated, religiously motivated genocide against Burmese Muslims. Most estimates hover at around 80 deaths and 90,000 displaced persons and thousands of homes burnt, from both sides. However, some media and Islamist groups have interpreted that all deaths, destruction and refugees were only among the Rohingya community.

Muslim online opinion expressed on the issue has also generally framed it as a genocide directed against all Myanmar Muslims. The Burmese are portrayed as inherently racist and Islamophobic, and the argument is unfortunately strengthened by acerbic online responses from Burmese netizens. Claims that over 20,000 Muslims have been killed in the recent violence have also spread on some Muslim websites. Pictures claimed to be of masses of Rohingya corpses have also circulated online. However, these pictures appeared to be recycled ones of Rohingya refugees detained by Thai or Indonesian security personnel.

This last narrative has been picked up by media outlets in some Muslim countries, based on which some Islamic organisations, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, have started calling for intervention on behalf of the Rohingya. Protests were held outside Myanmar missions in Egypt and Kuwait while around 300 Islamic hardliners vowed jihad in front of the Burmese embassy in Jakarta on 13 July.

Extremist Implications

The Arakanese and Burmese have labelled the Rohingya rioters as terrorists operating on the instructions of Al Qaeda. While this is highly unlikely, there have been attempts by certain Rohingya organisations in the past to link up with regional militant Islamic organisations with links to the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and Rohingya militant training camps and Rohingyas receiving militant training have been documented.

As these activities have been relatively minor and isolated, it is highly unlikely that most of Rohingya society has undergone radicalisation. However, with poverty, a lack of political alternatives, pervasive prejudice and possible instigation from 'interested' extremists, the continuing lack of solution to the Rohingya situation can serve to fuel segments of Rohingya society to pursue a violent path. The real and embellished accounts, genuine and doctored photos, alongside rumours online may galvanize extremist groups unconnected with Myanmar to carry out 'retaliatory' attacks.

There appears to be a distinct line drawn between other Muslims in Myanmar and the Rohingya in the Burmese perspective – the 'sentiment' has been anti-Rohingya rather than anti-Muslim. However, calls for action from Islamic countries and organisations, and extremist reactions, could very well erode this barrier and unleash a wider religious conflict. Thus far, the violence has been limited to Rakhine state; the Burmese government, as well as Buddhist, Muslim and other organisations have been working to prevent the problem from spreading further.

Solving the problem

Solving the situation would take time, effort, education, discussions and compromise. Addressing the Citizenship Law, improving the overall economic and social situation of Rakhine State and tackling demographic issues would be some of the steps crucial to diffusing the tension. As both sides argue incessantly on the basis of history, clarifying the region's history might also help to some extent.

Separating the two communities, as the government has currently done for short-term security reasons, would temporarily alleviate the violence but will only reinforce mutual distrust in the long run. Involvement by uninformed external parties galvanized by embellished statements would only serve to further complicate a delicate solution. The Burmese government, used to quelling such incidents through force, is only starting to figure out how to settle such matters without the gun and by properly addressing human security issues.

There is no debate on the situation - civilised communication is lacking and the Arakanese and the Rohingya are pathologically dismissive of the other's notions, usually on ad hominem bases. The unrests risks derailing the fragile reform process, as it augments arguments for a return to authoritarianism. The situation in Western Myanmar will prove to be a serious challenge not only for Naypyidaw, but also for neighbouring governments.

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